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YALE UNIVERSITY PRIZE POEM

1916

PORTRAITS

BY

JOHN CHIPMAN FARRAR

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PREFATORY NOTE

This poem received the eighteenth award of the prize offered by Professor Albert Stanburrough Cook to Yale University for the best unpublished verse, the Committee of Award consisting of Professors Chauncey B. Tinker, of Yale University, Alfred Noyes, of Princeton University, and Edwin Mims, of Vanderbilt University.

PORTRAITS

A SACRISTAN

Sometimes on summer noons the silence grows
Unbearable; but then I sweep and dust
The images, or polish off the rust
Blackening the twisted brass. At curfew-time
I ring the bell, and then, it seems, the chime
Looks in my heart and knows.

There are so very many little things
Each day—perhaps you might not understand
The joy of reaching out a quiet hand
To touch the cross; or once—it was at night—
Suddenly all the hushed blue church grew white
With holy angels' wings.

ONE BORN BLIND

They tell me there are gleaming stars afar,
Golden and silver-white—I cannot tell
Whether they lie who speak. Stars may as well
Be crimson or blue or darting green-tongued flames;
To me they are but hollow, far-sung names—
I know not what they are.

They tell me how the world and life began:
Some talk of fire-wrought worlds, some mystics dream
Of distant heavens with cherubim agleam.
I care not whether they have seen or know;
But this is true—my heart has told me so—
God was and is a man.

A NUN

He died at morning. I was nursing then;
The priest had shriven him, and his soul was white;
But in the cruel stillness of that night
His tired eyes opened, and his hand sought mine.
I took it softly. Pardon me, divine
Mary, Mother of men.

Then, first, I noticed his strong face, grown thin,
The yearning fever of his lips, the eyes
That longed for comfort. Was I too unwise
To stoop, and in the unseeing darkness, kiss
Away his fear of death? O speak, was this,
Mary, a fearful sin?

A HILLSIDE FARMER

Dawn—and the mist across the silent lane;
Each day its little round of petty tasks.
'Are you not very lonely' some one asks,
'Here where the old folks stay, and no one new
Comes in to start a farm? You should go, too;
Valleys grow better grain.'

'This may seem still and lonely, but for me
Hill-tops are wider than the open land.
Maybe you never could quite understand
How dear it is to me—this loneliness.
You think the hills are narrowing, I guess;
But, oh, how far we see!'

A COAL-MINER

How dark it is! This time the load is big
And heavier. Somehow, it is so far
Up to the places where the carloads are.
All I can see is her face, as she sat
Coughing and weakening, just for need of that
Which I could only dig!

It was so cold that year, and damp, beside.
Wages were low, and every day I'd pile
The shining lumps in heaping baskets, while
I knew she needed it. You would have thought
I could have stolen some; but I was caught.
She had a chill—and died.

A NURSE

I can remember quiet times, and those
When you had tired yourself with riotous play;
Then we would sit, and while the passing day
With fairy tales of lands beyond the sun.
You loved me, then, completely—not as one
Who does her work and goes.

I saw you yesterday. Your hair is light;
We thought it would be darker. Oh, why, why
Did you not know me as I passed you by?
Have I grown old? You could not be too proud.
You might have spoken, yes, or only bowed,
Or—have you forgotten, quite?

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